

House Bill 440  
February 14, 2013  
Presented by Jeff Hagener  
House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Jeff Hagener and I am the Director of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. I rise in opposition to HB 440.

I recognize and understand the controversy surrounding Habitat Montana that has led Representative Kary to introduce HB 440. I am committed to addressing these issues, and over the next year the department will be developing a plan for how to meet its operations and maintenance needs on department-owned land, re-assessing our habitat program objectives, and placing greater emphasis on the use conservation easements to conserve important habitat and provide hunting access.

However, I believe that HB 440 goes too far, and has several problems that concern me. My greatest concern is that HB 440 forecloses the option for the department to purchase any land with Habitat Montana funding. While it is my intent that the department will place a significantly lower priority on fee title acquisitions, I do not want to forgo that option completely. The simple fact is that easements and acquisitions are both useful tools, but apply differently for different landowners.

My second concern is about how HB 440 proposes to spend the Habitat Montana funding. FWP already has the ability within the hunting access program to do what this bill proposes – to acquire hunting access easements across private lands to adjoining public lands. We also have a funding source dedicated to that purpose – the Coming Home to Hunt licenses. What we have discovered from implementing this program over the last four years is that there is a limited audience of landowners interested in this program and that their expectation for compensation is often different than the actual appraised value. These access easements are a valuable tool, and can provide critical access to public land in some situations. However, I do not believe that we could come anywhere close to spending all of the funding currently in the Habitat Montana program on the access easement program that HB 440 proposes.

I do appreciate that Representative Kary included a termination date on the bill.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, FWP opposes HB 440 for these reasons and requests a 'Do Not Pass.' Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.